Recovering through the Mythic Message: The Role of Hermes in Alcoholics Anonymous

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Fig. 1. unknown artist. (1825) *Hermes Leading Persephone out of the Underworld. Yale Center for British Art New Haven, CT, USA*

At the center of the recovery program, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), there is a “big” book, called *The Big Book* which is the basic text for the AA fellowship (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). In this book there is a list of steps serving as a guide to overcome addiction to alcohol, along with personal accounts of recovery from others who have suffered from alcoholism. Though reading a book is probably the last thing a recovering alcoholic wants to do in early sobriety, it is something tangible for the sufferer to hold on to, a life raft of guidance that is part of the rite of passage into recovery. That something so common as the written and spoken word could have the power to help alcoholics overcome their addiction suggests an underlying mythic dynamic of the transformation of consciousness that occurs in the process of recovery from addiction to alcohol. With a book containing experiences of alcoholics at the center of the fellowship of AA, it is possible that Hermes, “the messenger of the Gods” (Kerenyi, 1951, p.161) might mythically, symbolically be present in the process of recovery that has worked for so many suffering from addiction. In this paper I hope to psychologically amplify the hermetic road to recovery of the alcoholic through the role of Hermes in the Persephone myth. In this way, I hope to appreciate recovery from a mythological, depth psychological perspective.

To give some personal background, in the summer of 2021, my alcohol drinking got out of hand. I had taken a leave of absence from Pacifica, gotten fired from my job, and was in a downward spiral of escaping myself through online dating and being under the influence in the process. It was not long from the first time I tried drinking all day that to do most everyday tasks I required a drink. This, most dangerously, included driving. Even after getting a potential DUI, I did not think I had a problem. I entered the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous full of denial and what many alcoholics call “contempt prior to investigation”. My ego was inflated bigger than the *The Big Book*. I did not think I had a problem even though my days were dedicated to finding the next drink. Further, I had no awareness that I might be caught in forces larger than myself.

These forces, present in the process of both addiction and recovery, might be explored in the myth of Persephone. In the myth of Persephone, a young maiden (Persephone) who is psychically umbilically attached to her mother, the harvest goddess Demeter, is taken against her will by Hades, the god of the underworld. This is characterized by Kerenyi as the rape of Persephone, as Hades takes her “by force to the realm of darkness paying small heed to her loud weeping” (Kerenyi, 1951, p. 234). Demeter who loves her daughter dearly is devastated and threatens humanity by withholding harvest unless her daughter is returned to her. Hearing of this, Zeus sends none other than Hermes, the messenger god, to rescue her, and bring her back to her mother, Demeter. Hades gives Persephone pomegranate seeds

to eat before she leaves, however, and having eaten something from the underworld, Persephone must return to the underworld for four months of the year (Boer, 1995, pp. 131-132).

In the first part of the myth, there is a theme of being taken against one's will, possessed in a realm without nourishment of the mother. Jungian Analyst, Linda Leonard, writes how "the analogy to the addict here is striking: like Persephone he is taken down to the Underworld unconsciously and remains there in forgetfulness or denial of the addiction" (Leonard, 1989, p. 255). As Leonard posits, in addiction the addict is abducted through the potency of the substance into a realm of underground possession. The strength of the addiction is such that the residence in the underworld is against his/her will. The abduction is, in a sense, unconscious, as the alcoholic develops a bodily dependence while he/she is intoxicated which makes the obsessive behavior inevitable. While in active addiction, the brain, body mind is compromised thus leading to the "forgetfulness or denial" which corresponds to Persephone's essential disappearance in her abduction to the Underworld and her inability to bring herself back without outside help.

There are many stories in *The Big Book* that describe a sort of abduction and descent and ascent. In Bill's Story, Bill Wilson, founder of AA writes of his friend in recovery,

> "His human will had failed. Doctors had pronounced him incurable. Society was about to lock him up. Like myself, he

> admitted complete defeat. Then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead, suddenly taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than he had ever known!" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 11).

Like Persephone, the addict's willpower becomes negligible against the addiction. And like Persephone, the tools of the upper world are not applicable as even doctors are at a loss when combating addiction. There is also the sense that the addict is not fully living, at least not in his/her best interest. The addict is living for the substance, not for his or her whole self. There is hope, though, of recovering even to a life that was better than the life prior to alcoholism as discovered by Bill Wilson's friend. Similarly, in the myth of Persephone, she is able to return to Demeter but with her own journey of development and sovereignty.

Another story from *The Big Book* details a woman's struggle with alcohol in her marriage which she describes as a "one-night stand that lasted 5 years" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 514). From this characterization, her marriage shows signs of abduction in the extension of the quality of a one-night stand lasting five years and even this became a site of abduction as alcohol led to her divorce. She goes on to disclose that she could not admit responsibility for her drinking, even for the sake of her kids, and eventually was thrown out of the house. She writes, "I wasn't bathing. I couldn't answer my phone. I couldn't show up on weekends to visit my kids. So I prayed" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 516) . Here is

the pathology of a lack of connection to Demeter, the nourishing mother as she cannot nurture herself or her children. Patricia Berry notes how a woman with a “depressed” Demeter consciousness “ceases to bathe, ceases to eat, disguises her beauty, denies the future (her possibilities of rejuvenation and productivity)” (Berry, 1994, p. 199). Like a depressed Demeter, without the mythic Demeter-Persephone bond the woman in this story from *The Big Book* is trapped in her addiction, denying the future in her inability to care for herself or her children.

Demeter’s anguish at the loss of her daughter can also be amplified in the psychology of families and the upper world waiting for Persephone’s return. One man’s story reveals, “My employer gave me one warning, then another. My children avoided me. When I awoke in the middle of the night with shakes and sweats and fears, I would hear my wife weeping quietly in bed beside me” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 557). The disease takes its toll on all those around the addict, which can be reflected in the powerlessness of Demeter to bring her daughter back from the underworld. The tragedy in the life of an alcoholic extends beyond the alcoholic him/herself, just as the rape of Persephone takes its toll on the whole world. With regards to the alcoholic, the family often appeals to the doctor, but the doctor is at a loss as well, help must come from another source.

The common theme linking these stories is how “so many want to stop but cannot” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 25). Alcoholics’ lives are thrown away as they are trapped by their addiction, unable to make it back

to everyday life without outside help. This outside help, however, does not come from “the land of the living”. It is Hermes, the messenger God, who guides the psychic transformation out of addiction into recovery. In the myth of Persephone, Kerenyi writes that upon hearing of Demeter causing the draught, Zeus “sent Hermes, the god with the golden staff, into the darkness of the Underworld, to persuade Hades with soft words and to bring Persephone back from the gloom and up to the gods and the light” (Kerenyi, 1951, p. 239). Amplified psychologically, Hermes is sent to appeal to the addict who is still in Hades’ underworld through a crisis requiring the addict to be exposed to AA through *The Big Book*. The Hermetic message, the story, is the voice of many alcoholics who have suffered from powerlessness over alcohol, who have watched their lives fall apart due to addiction, and reflects the psychological transformation from Hermes that occurs in recovery. *The Big Book* itself could be seen as a herm, the ancient statue of Hermes that stands at the crossroads, similar to the way the alcoholic who requires recovery is at a personal crossroads. The message is that the journey with alcohol is not unique, which calls for a necessary humility that is part of the psychology of the guidance of Hermes out of the Underworld. The message is in the stories of the physical book and also in the shares of the meetings themselves.

Part of the hermetic quiddity of the myth is that Hermes does not just deliver the message, though the book is fundamental to the program. Hermes also personally guides Persephone and is active in her return to the

upper world. The spirit of Hermes is in the Fellowship surrounding the message in the book, which then becomes a part of the active guidance of Persephone out of the Underworld. The psyche requires this hermetic connection in recovery from addiction, and Persephone's participation as well. As the AA saying goes, it works if you work it. The participation in the fellowship is what is healing, the way it is an alcoholic that can help another alcoholic. In fact, the founder Bill W notes how he "suddenly realized that in order to save himself he must carry his message to another alcoholic" in the creation of the group (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. xvi). Here we have the psychological constellation of the healing effect of carrying a message to another who is suffering in a similar way, again suggesting the myth of the messenger god Hermes. Both in the group setting and in one-on-ones, the healing is in the sharing, carrying the message to another with a similar experience. Making it back to the upper world requires careful passage and it is working the program with others that helps recover from addiction.

During an AA meeting, Hermes is present in giving out chips, creating value for sober time, starting with a 24-hour chip there is rebirth into sober life. Being rewarded with a coin creates a positive affirmation reflecting Hermes the god of commerce and trade's active participation in Persephone's recovery. Jung notes in his *Visions* Seminar how "the Greek God Hermes was really a messenger of the gods, as well as a sort of patron saint of anything that had to do with money matters, exchange, sending and receiving goods, and so on." (Jung, 1998 p. 505). Thus, being awarded chips

for sober time is a way the trickster of Hermes is constellated in the psychology of changing the addicts mind to value sobriety. Further there is exchange of “goods” in the exchange of stories, everyone is welcome to listen and share in the meeting. There is collective celebration and accomplishment in AA birthdays and the feeling that one is being reborn into a new life, Hermes bringing Persephone back from the underworld, as the addict exchanges the powerlessness of addiction for recovery. Though the gift is much more than the chips themselves, the idea of valuing sober time as currency is part of the psychic healing of Hermes in the program.

Further, the personal guidance of Hermes is also present in the idea of having a sponsor. This also fosters a sense of accountability and consistency. The sponsor offers a hand with no apparent gain for his/herself and through this can lead by example. Here is the idea of one alcoholic guiding another out of the underworld. Part of what works in AA is overcoming selfishness, the way Hermes is carrying out the mission of returning Persephone to Demeter with no apparent gain for himself. Persephone even refers to him as “helpful Hermes” (Boer, 1995, p. 126). In a similar way, the sponsor, in service to his/her sponsee demonstrates how overcoming alcoholism involves overcoming self-centeredness. In the Section “How it Works” in *The Big Book* the alcoholic co-authors write, “Selfishness- self-centeredness! That, we think is the root of our troubles… above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 62). In the myth of Persephone, it is the narcissus

flower that Persephone was about to pick before falling victim to Hades in the Underworld (Kerenyi, 1951 p.232). The self-seeking occurs with the abduction of alcoholism. The narcissism and self-centeredness are hallmarks of the alcoholic's behavior and it is the service-oriented attitude in Hermes bringing Persephone back to Demeter that can counteract the self-centeredness of the addiction. The sponsor, in her guidance of her sponsee, can show how helping others helps oneself.

It is for this reason that service is one of the core foundations of AA. It is one of the three words on the AA triangle that is found on the chips given out: along the edges of the triangle are unity, recovery and service. Service is essential to the functioning of the organization as one of the traditions is to decline outside monetary contributions. Further, the work done for the group is not paid. Helping others is a way to help oneself, service is the reward. This is why service positions are encouraged even in early sobriety. The alcoholic is able to get out of his/her head and feel useful, especially after so much time where all energy was consumed in finding the next drink. It is confidence-building as well to know that one is contributing to a noble cause. The simplicity of the tasks such as making coffee or being a greeter also enables the simplicity of Persephone's innocence to return to the upper world as the alcoholic re-discovers life as if for the first time again, as a sober person. Embracing the helpful, though apparently menial tasks helps the alcoholic discover the joy in tending to Demeter consciousness, as Hermes serves Zeus by reuniting Persephone with her

mother. Even as one continues in the program, no position is valued more than another. As stated in the 12 Traditions, “Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern,”(Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 562) as the point is to not fall into the same desires for power that resulted in the powerlessness of addiction and instead serve those in need and heal through this service.

Hermes is then individually constellated in the alcoholic’s journey through the 12 steps. These steps, done with the help of a sponsor, resembles the passage of Hermes leading Persephone out of the Underworld. Step 1 is “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 59). This contains the psychological parallel to Persephone’s powerlessness in the abduction by Pluto. There is an apparent endlessness to the addiction, and the inability to stop reflects a psychological powerlessness. Persephone is trapped in the underworld with Hades and the life with Demeter in the upperworld is barren and unmanageable. This open admission of powerlessness has its roots in Jung’s exposure to patients suffering from alcoholism. Bill Wilson, wrote to Carl Jung on January 23, 1961 speaking of Jung’s experience with his patient,

> “[Y]ou frankly told him of his hopelessness, so far as any further medical or psychiatric treatment might be concerned. This candid and humble statement of yours was beyond doubt the

first foundation stone upon which our Society has since been built". (Wilson, 1961)

In a way through this correspondence Wilson is suggesting that Jung was making a concession of the powerlessness not just of the alcoholic but also the current available healthcare treatment. Both Persephone and Demeter are powerless to Hades. By admitting this powerlessness, the unconsciousness of alcoholism is made conscious as Hermes' speech connects the realms of Hades and Demeter through Persephone. It is in this moment of Step 1, that Persephone can meet Hermes, as the powerlessness to alcohol and the inability to return to the upper world are frankly admitted. Hermes finds Persephone "shame-faced"(Kerenyi, 1951, p.239) next to her husband Hades, as alcoholics must embrace the humility of powerlessness before they can begin the journey back. Hermes, a god who stands at the crossroads is there when the unmanageability of an upper world of Persephone-less Demeter reaches its turning point, enough for the alcoholic to make this first essential admission. It is then that the alcoholic can begin the path back to the upperworld through the steps with Hermes.

The Second Step in AA is "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity"(Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 59). At first glance this step may seem to suggest that there was a sanity in the first place to be restored, which may seem at odds with what alcoholics often say as alcohol being a symptom of the larger issues they are struggling with. Life was already imbalanced and alcohol was a response to

that for the alcoholic. In his correspondence with Bill Wilson about one of his alcoholic patients, Jung writes “His craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God” (Jung, 1961). So there is often in alcoholism a longing for the restoration of wholeness with God that is impelling the alcoholic to drink in the first place. Alas, the alcohol makes matters worse as in a sort of Faustian bargain the alcoholic becomes more powerless than ever. The alcoholic may strive to gain spirituality through alcohol but ends up in the powerlessness of addiction as Persephone is abducted by Hades. Further, the alcoholic believes that he/she is more powerful than the alcohol which is why the spirituality is not genuine and the powerlessness imminent. Hence the importance of finding a union with the higher power that is greater than him/herself, which enables the spirituality the alcoholic was longing for in the first place.

This can be seen as a dynamic in female drinkers in particular, the longing in the psyche for wholeness in response to the one-sidedness of Demeter consciousness in the mother-daughter codependence. Jan Bauer in *Alcoholism and Women* writes how “from a mythological point of view, one could say that mother-Demeter keeps daughter-Kore from contact with the raw stuff of life”(Bauer, 1982, p. 103). Due to being too sheltered, Kore in the form of Persephone’s psyche is not whole and therefore not necessarily “sane”. Drinking could be that first impulse to separate from the mother, but quickly becomes another dependence and powerlessness of addiction.

Jungian Analyst Marion Woodman writes of the Persephone myth, “the woman has to be separated from the mother, and for that to happen she has to surrender to the masculine principle-externally or internally” (Woodman, 2009, p. 121). Thus, Hades’ abduction of Persephone introduces her to the masculine principle, forcing the surrender of the innocent mother-daughter bond. For certain female alcoholics, alcoholism could be seen as the Hades separating Persephone from the mother so she can eventually develop the masculine principle and eventually deal with raw life in a sober manner, after recovering.

In the same letter to Bill W, Jung writes that it is *Spiritus contra spiritum*, or finding religion in place of the thirst for spirituality through alcohol, that can be the solution for alcoholics. For the woman, in reference to Woodman’s contention of the woman surrendering to the masculine principle, this “spirit” of alcohol could be the masculine counterpart that could be impelling the separation from the mother. Granted, the separation from the mother results in the powerlessness of the alcohol addiction as Persephone loses touch with the nurturing of Demeter in the upper world. Trapped in Hades, she may have separated from her mother but she also is without the nurturing feminine. Therefore Persephone must be restored to the world of Demeter but with the wholeness of developing her spiritual capacity. Hence, in the direction towards sanity, her relationship with her mother is not the same as before. Persephone, through Hermes, is developing the spiritual relationship to her inner masculine and feminine. It

is the *spiritus contra spiritum*, for the alcoholic it is the right relationship with spirit or power greater than his or herself that can bring one into sanity but with the sense of spirituality and wholeness that, as Jung states, was what the alcoholic was yearning for all along.

Thus, for Persephone, in the underworld, trapped in her addiction, to come back to the world of Demeter she must come to believe that there is a wholeness possible, albeit through a different pathway than the spirit of alcohol. This is where the willingness to begin the journey back to her mother with Hermes comes into play. Hermes, the trickster God who deals with exchanges must be appreciated if there is to be an exchange of *spiritus contra spiritum*. Sometimes when I hear Alcoholics Anonymous I think it sounds like Alcoholic “Synonymous” and I know the spirit of Hemes is there, revealing how we are exchanging alcohol for alcohol-synonymous, spirit contra spirit. The exchange is also in the spirit of fellowship, the extending of a helping hand to the newcomer who is still in the underworld, sharing one’s stories and being available for a phone call when needed.

With the guidance of Hermes, Persephone can then open herself up to a larger guiding principle of her life as she begins the journey back, cultivating spirituality through the Steps, nurturing her inner masculine through spirituality and feminine through her relationship with both Hades and Demeter. Further, Hermes is in the spirituality as Step 3 says “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 59). There is Hermes in

the open-ended understanding of God. Persephone develops a relationship to both Hades and Demeter turning her will over to the movement of the seasons. Psychologically amplified, the female alcoholic can have a healthy relationship with both masculine and feminine principles through embracing the understanding of God through Hermes.

Further, many in the fellowship attest to the group and the friendships being their "higher power." Jung himself in the letter to Bill W writes how one can be led to the spiritual experience alcoholics yearn for through "personal and honest contact with friends." (Jung, 1951), which also supports their recovery. This could speak to the Persephone-Hermes connection in the myth. When saving Persephone from the Underworld, Hermes does not approach Persephone as a lover (Hades) or parent figure (Demeter), rather he meets her as a fellow Olympian. Likewise, in AA one alcoholic approaches another as a fellow alcoholic. In *The Kore Goddess: a mythology and psychology*, Safron Rossi writes how "we require sibling-style bonds wherein we discover ourselves in both connection and contrast to someone like us" (Rossi, 2021, p. 190). Though Hermes and Persephone are not siblings or apparent friends, the spirit of relating to one another equally on a shared mission could be amplified psychologically as recovery involving Hermes consciousness leading Persephone out of the Underworld. This bond of friendship is personified in the higher power of fellowship in one alcoholic helping another. Sometimes it is the bond of platonic

friendship that can finally enable one to turn one's self-will over to a power greater than oneself.

Finally, the 12th Step states, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs." (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 60). Not only does this step contain the idea of carrying the message to other alcoholics, which has psychological Hermetic quiddity of the message, but also attempt of practicing the principles in all areas of life, which suggests the need for continual renewal which resonates with the cyclical nature of the Persephone myth. Hillman notes how Persephone "represents this movement of the soul from defense against Hades to love for him" (Rossi, Module 2, Class Lecture, DJA 815) . This brings the idea of a grateful alcoholic. Alcoholics learn to love the fellowship, the return to the meetings and continual practicing of principles. As mentioned earlier, "the alcoholic had been taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than he had ever known!" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 11). Thus, practicing the principles in all areas of life can be a labor of love, one whose ongoing renewal is cause for gratitude for a way of life.

In the myth of Persephone, before Hermes guides her back, Hades gives Persephone berries from the underworld to ensure that she returns. One might think that this is a metaphor for relapse as she is bound to keep descending down to the same territory that she was initially abducted into. For instance, Linda Leonard writes of the alcoholic who relapses,

> “Given the chance to return, if he forgets the fate of the addiction-that to eat or drink of it is fatal- and in relapse partakes of the addictive substance or activity, he is returned, hostage once again to the demonic forces that possess him” (Leonard, 1989, p. 255).

As Leonard states, however, relapse brings the alcoholic *hostage* again, implying powerlessness and lack of escape. This is distinct from a conscious return with the agreement in place that it will only be 1/3 of the year, and Persephone’s cycle back to the underworld is not an abduction each time, especially with the idea that Persephone learns to love Hades. One could then look at Hades giving Persephone berries as a metaphor for the essential ongoing participation in meetings in the AA fellowship. It is true, there is no “time” in Hades and in AA there is the handing out of the chips for sober time but one could see that time would be stopped in the sense that the day of the last drink will be frozen in place, and the revisiting necessary in the meetings is one of retrospective sharing. Relapse would be a transgressing of the agreement, and could very well send the addict back into Hades without Hermes to guide the way back.

Further, the Anonymous quality of the fellowship speaks to Hades’ invisibility, or what Hillman describes as “not an absence, but a hidden presence- even an invisible fullness” (Hillman, 1989, p. 28) which supports the idea of attending meetings as a conscious return to Hades, a place of shared anonymity, in contrast to relapse. The Anonymity of AA ensures we

let go of the upper world to share the experience with others who had been similarly previously trapped in the Underworld but are consciously making the return through sharing the stories. As relayed in *The Big Book*, "once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 33) The Hades underworld exists within all of us alcoholics, but the fact that we are never cured and must continue going to meetings, revisiting our experiences and working through the steps is not necessarily a bad thing. Life in recovery can actually be better than the one before. Persephone's life with both Hades and Demeter is more her own than either of them alone and is one where her rhythm is truly in service to others and her higher self. It is through this return of Persephone to Hades that one can appreciate the rhythm of recovery.

To conclude, in this paper we have outlined the Persephone myth and its connection to alcoholism, first drawing the psychological parallel of abduction and addiction through the quiddity of Persephone's powerlessness. These were explored through the firsthand account of alcoholics in *The Big Book*, particularly noting the psychological absence of Demeter during active addiction. The fact that these stories came from *The Big Book* was then drawn upon as a psychological amplification of Hermes and further exemplified through the journey through the steps and the traditions of AA, such as the chips, service, sponsorship, and continual meetings. These external examples can be seen as evidence as

manifestations of the psychological transformation that works to bring the alcoholic into recovery.

As a recovering addict, I still so often believe that for any sort of suffering or trouble or disease there is a treatment with an immediate fix. The notion that following steps, sharing a story and reading a book could help me recover has been a truly difficult pill for me to swallow. However it is one that has kept me sober. It is an active engagement rather than a substance, and takes a lot of effort. But we are not alone. From *The Big Book* to sponsorship, Hermes is there with us as a guide. Through honoring him in a depth psychology that embraces a mythic approach I can slowly recognize at whose alter I may express my eternal thanks for recovery.

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